

January 31, 2010 - Capitol Milestone: Murtha to Become Longest-Serving Congressman in PA History

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Capitol milestone: Murtha to become longest-serving congressman in Pa. history

By RANDY GRIFFITH

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— John Murtha is a survivor.

The 77-year-old Democrat has encountered wars, a flood, scandals, national and regional fiscal meltdowns and media firestorms in his life and political career that spans four decades.

On Feb. 20, Murtha will begin his 37th year as representative in the 12th Congressional District, marking a milestone that will make him the longest-serving congressman in the history of Pennsylvania.

He will surpass Republican Joseph McDade of Scranton, who retired in 1999 after 18 terms.

Supporters describe Murtha as a recognized expert on military issues and a leader behind the scenes who is able to get the job done.

Detractors point to millions in federal earmarks he has directed to projects they claim are funded to attract votes or reward campaign contributors.

"The public doesn't like earmarks," said Craig Holman, government affairs lobbyist for Public Citizen.

"An earmark, generally, is something that is a privilege to friends and local businesses," Holman said.

"It does not really reflect the public interest."

But Murtha has used his leadership position on the Defense Appropriations Committee to direct funds that helped diversify an economy in his district, which was reeling from the collapse of the steel and mining industries, say supporters — including Ed Sheehan Jr., president and chief executive officer of Concurrent Technologies Corp. in Richland Township.

"He is a leader," Sheehan said. "He helped bring together this region when it was going through great economic strife to help do everything he could to help it recover."

Leadership abilities serve Congress well, said Rep. Joe Sestak, D-Delaware County, adding the former Marine's military service sowed the seeds for Murtha's public service career.

"I have found in him a great mentor," said Sestak, now a candidate for the U.S. Senate. "I think his role as a lifetime military person stands out — particularly when he volunteered to go to Vietnam. His has truly been selfless in service."

"A long tenure"

Murtha's time in Vietnam and command position at a Johnstown reserve unit provided credentials for his first run for public office in the 1968, when he failed to unseat the late John Saylor in a close race for the former 22nd Congressional District seat.

The next spring, he was elected to the state house in a special election following the death of Rep. Edward W. McNally, namesake of the McNally Bridge on Route 219.

Murtha was sworn in June 2, 1969, in Harrisburg, and served just more than 3 1/2 years in the state House. Legislative highlights during the period included introduction of a state income tax, no-fault car insurance and institution of the current district magisterial court system to replace less-efficient neighborhood justices of the peace.

Saylor's unexpected death on Oct. 28, 1973, set up another special election on Feb. 6, 1974. Murtha surprised many when he edged former Saylor aide Harry Fox of Armstrong County by 122 votes in the heavily Republican district.

Murtha was sworn in as a congressman for the first time on Feb. 20, 1974, but he was required to run again for a full term nine months later.

When he defeated Fox again — this time by 25,222 votes — it led The Tribune-Democrat in November 1974 to speculate that Murtha "could be in for a long tenure as the district's representative in Congress."

Over then next 17 general elections, he faced a dozen different opponents in 15 contested races, defeating each by at least 33,000 votes. Even a Republican-designed redistricting that pitted him against fellow Democratic incumbent Frank Mascara led to 26,850-vote trouncing by Murtha in the spring 2002 primary.

This year, Murtha faces four opponents so far — including two Democrats.

William Russell of Upper Yoder Township is making his second run against Murtha and is joined in the Republican primary ballot by Johnstown native Tim Burns, now of Eighty-Four, Washington County.

Ryan Bucchianeri, 34, of Monongahela and Johnstown native Ron Mackell Jr., of San Antonio, Texas, say they will oppose

Murtha in the Democratic primary – set for May 18.

Two years ago, Russell’s campaign focused on Murtha’s 2005 call for the Bush administration to change strategy and start pulling troops from Iraq.

This time around, all four challengers cite Murtha’s pork-barrel spending and investigations of several defense contractors and a lobbying firm with ties to the congressman.

Veteran of political wars

But Murtha has been up for battles in the past. He received two Purple Hearts for minor injuries related to enemy fire in Vietnam.

In Congress, he first took on the fight against steel imports, working to preserve what was left of domestic production. He soon waded in to help after the 1977 Johnstown Flood and led the struggle against government red tape and other roadblocks faced by those rebuilding and recovering.

Soon it was apparent that the local steel plants would not survive, and he shifted his energy to infrastructure improvements, pollution control and parks and recreation to pave the way for economic development.

At the same time, local leaders credit Murtha with pushing for cooperation and changing the heavy-industry mindset to open the way for defense contracting and information technology development.

On the foreign policy front, he has counseled seven presidents, helped expose fraud in the Philippines elections and was involved with crafting U.S. policy for dozens of trouble spots around the world.

After a 1975 visit to Cambodia, he predicted a bloodbath there a month before Pol Pot and his Khmer Rouge followers overran the capital of Phnom Penh and began four years of terror and genocide that wiped out 20 percent of the population.

Murtha often has come under attack. He was investigated in the 1980 Abscam scandal, but was eventually cleared of all wrongdoing.

The latest attackers link Murtha to several defense contractors and a lobbying firm that have come under investigation.

Last year, a former executive with Coherent Systems International pleaded guilty to taking kickbacks from a government subcontractor identified only as "K," but believed to be Windber-based Kuchera Industries and Kuchera Defense Systems. Coherent also operated a plant in the Windber area.

Federal agents in January 2009 raided the Kuchera plant and homes of founders Ronald and William Kuchera. The companies and founders were twice banned from government contract work before the operations were sold earlier this month to Toronto-based API Technologies Corp. for \$24 million.

The Office of Congressional Ethics in December announced it would not take action against Murtha.